



U.S. Department of Transportation
National Highway Traffic Safety
Administration

NHTSA
People Saving People
www.nhtsa.dot.gov

What a Difference Five Years Made!

1994–Present

Expanded the Agency's Consumer Information Services to Include Side Impact Crash Testing, New Consumer Brochures and Internet Web Sites

Goal 4: Improve data collection and analysis to better identify and understand problems and to support and evaluate programs: expedite the availability of information to customers and partners.

NHTSA began assessing the occupant protection capabilities of new cars back in 1978, by conducting frontal barrier crash tests at a high speed. The first goal of this New Car Assessment Program (NCAP) was to give consumers a measure of the relative safety potential of automobiles. The second goal was to establish market forces that encourage vehicle manufacturers to design higher levels of safety into their vehicles. The agency began its NCAP by conducting frontal crash tests on various vehicles and releasing the ratings in a score format to aid consumers in their purchasing decisions. NCAP scores have improved steadily since the beginning of the program. In model year 1999, about 88 percent of the passenger cars had four or five stars in frontal NCAP testing compared with only 33 percent in 1979.

Side Impact Testing

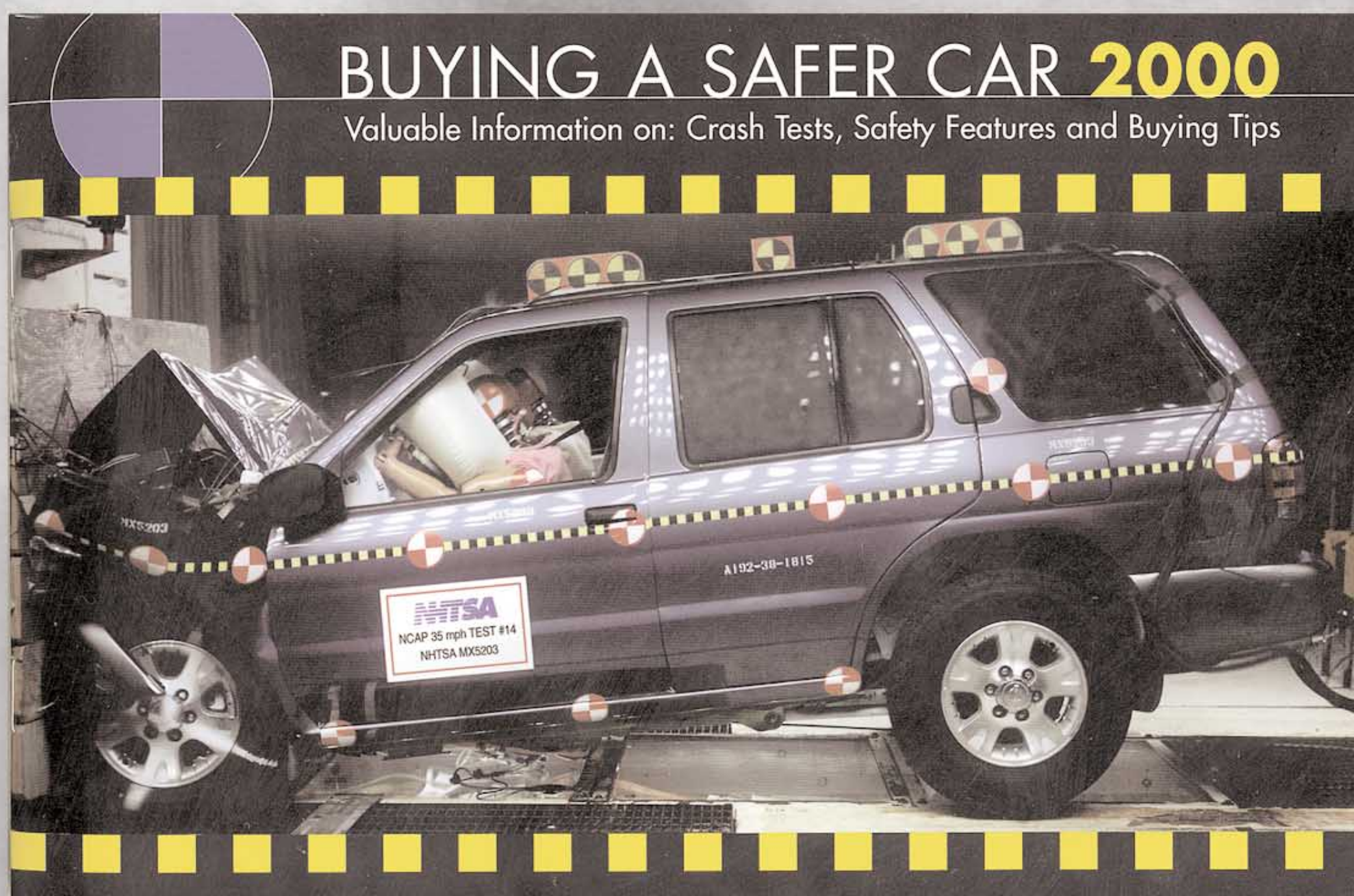
In 1997, the agency began its crash test program for side impact. The combination of frontal and side crash tests in NCAP gives consumers relative safety information on the two most common injury-causing crash events—frontal and side impacts. For the first year of side testing, we gave no five star rating. In the 1999 NCAP, we gave a five star rating to five passenger cars. It appears the NCAP side impact is following the same pattern as the NCAP frontal, i.e., the safety ratings are improving over time. Since the beginning of NCAP in 1978, the agency has tested 544 passenger cars and 223 light trucks and vans. The NCAP has grown into a worldwide force to promote and encourage automotive safety. The original US initiative has led to rapidly developing consumer information programs in Europe, Japan, and Australia.



The Consumer Program: Brochures and the Internet

While this crash test information is important to the public, the government historically focused on the engineering aspects of the NCAP tests, and not necessarily on its utility to consumers. However, several recent innovations have significantly improved the comprehensibility and accessibility of NCAP information provided to consumers. First, NCAP test information was always provided to consumers in very technical terms such as a "Head Injury Criteria" score. To improve consumers understanding of the information, the test results for each vehicle are now presented in an easy to understand five-star rating system. In addition, the program now promotes and disseminates NCAP safety ratings to the public through a multi-faceted approach of consumer information materials and campaigns, not just through a press release. Of particular note are the innovative partnerships that NHTSA has established with CART, Jiffy Lube, AAA and others to develop and disseminate NCAP safety ratings and other information through the Buying A Safer Car brochure and other materials. In 1998 and 1999 NHTSA developed consumer information campaigns that produced a video news release (VNR), radio public service announcements (PSAs), and three brochures. These products received widespread coverage resulting in 369 plays on network affiliate stations for the VNR, over 10,000 plays for the radio PSAs, plus 2,000 live reads of the radio spots, and distribution of approximately 600,000 of the brochures each year. In July 1996, about 1,000 visitors a week were going to the NCAP safety ratings on the Internet. Two and a half years later, in September 1999, roughly 23,000 people a week were visiting the NCAP safety ratings on the Internet.

Compelling evidence that these recent innovations have been effective in increasing the public's awareness and use of the crash test ratings in purchasing a new vehicle is not hard to find. Manufacturers who once opposed the government's crash test program, now market their "5-star vehicles" to consumers in ads on TV and in magazines.



"Team work is the heart of any successful operation. When we set our goals in the Strategic Plan back in 1994, we built in a foundation that empowered the NHTSA employee and sparked individual creativity and innovation. The resulting accomplishments of working as a team over the past half decade have been nothing short of magnificent. Everyone at NHTSA should feel we are moving forward. Because we are. Each one of you should feel very proud of your individual contributions to the overall momentum that is making highways safer for us all. We are, after all, people saving people. It's what we do – and what all of you do so well."

Congratulations and Thank You to All Members of the NHTSA Family for a Job Well Done!

Robert A. Menninger *William H. Wines* *Ken Weinstein* *Don Siskoff* *Rae Tyson* *Ray Owens* *Johnnie J.* *Alfred Daily* *Christina*